



# The Christian Remembering of the Muslim in Prayer and Worship

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**I**N A RECENT ISSUE OF *GLOBAL CONTACT* (A PUBLICATION OF THE EVANGELICAL Lutheran Church in America's Division for Global Mission), our daughter, Susheela, who is serving as a nurse-midwife/public health specialist in Senegal, West Africa, wrote as follows of her relationship with the Muslims in her Sahel village:

When we enter relationships with people of other faiths with open hearts and minds, stereotypes can finally begin to erode and true dialogue can take place, dialogue that entails mutual sharing and learning in the context of true friendship, humility, and respect; dialogue that is entered into without arrogance or ulterior motives; dialogue between friends.

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*In no Christian service is prayer more important than in the ministry among Muslims. The service is joyful, and friendships with Muslims become profound. The situation, however, calls for prayers of dedication, prayers for forgiveness and patient love, for the opening of doors and for receptive hearts, for the participation of the church, for the protection of believers, and for God's will to be known and done. The author of this essay takes us into the world of worship and prayer related to this apostolate.*

When we “remember the Muslim,” it needs to be in the spirit of friendship. Besides friendship there must be understanding, and *On Understanding Islam*<sup>1</sup> by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (the doyen of a distinguished group of Canadian scholars who view Islam/Muslims from a Christian viewpoint) is only one of many volumes whose titles contain the words “understanding” and “Islam” or “Muslims.” In the very useful *Islam, An Introduction for Christians*, edited by Luther Seminary’s Paul Varo Martinson, the need for “mutual understanding and respect” is noted in encounters with Muslims, encounters which may take place in three arenas, “home and family” (where “hospitality and neighborliness” are shared values), “economic and professional relationships,” and “recognition and justice.”<sup>2</sup>

To me, in addition to friendship and understanding, to be meaningful and effective relationships between Muslims and Christians require the dimension of prayer and worship, with the fourth “arena” for relationships being “the heart.” This dimension builds on the other three and brings them to fulfillment *sub specie aeternitatis* and with the vertical dimension added to the horizontal.

#### PRAYER

We are accustomed to the idea and practice of prayer *for* Muslims, but prayer *with* Muslims is rather another matter. Some Christians would rule it out *a priori*, and we cannot deny them that right nor condemn them for it; perhaps the vast majority of Muslims would heartily agree with them. I am writing for those who feel that the One we address in prayer and bow down before in worship is the same only One, God. While there may be very few opportunities for Muslims and Christians actually to pray/worship together in the same location, what can hinder us from praying *with* Muslims in spirit?

In addition to affirming the existence of the same only One, we and Muslims share a basic common understanding of what worship is, as well as a common vocabulary of worship going back to the Hebrew, *‘abodāh*, including the Arabic, *‘ibāda(t)*, and the Greek, *latreia/leitourgia*. All mean “service”: the servant’s proper response to the master in all things (in some ways more similar to Luther’s idea of *vocatio* than to the typical worship “service”). For Christians, properly, “worship” is everything we do as the servants of the Servant/Son of Yahweh (*‘ebed YHWH*) and as his body, the church. Many Muslims have as all or part of their name the word *‘abd* (“servant, slave”) followed by one of the ninety-nine “beautiful Names of God.” For them to be true to their name, everything they think, say, or do should be in the service of God and appropriate to God. But the same is true for all Muslims.

We also share with Muslims the proper postural response of the servant to the Master: *šāhāh/sāgad* (Hebrew); *sijdah/masjid* (Arabic); *kuptein/proskunein* (Greek)(“bow down, prostrate”). In addition, the Arabic word for formal prayer,

<sup>1</sup>W. C. Smith, *On Understanding Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>P. V. Martinson, ed., *Islam: An Introduction for Christians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994) 14, 100-103.

*salā(t)*, is derived from one of the Hebrew words for prayer, probably through the Aramaic or the Syriac (or even possibly the Ethiopic).<sup>3</sup>

Now, even though we share similar ideas and vocabulary concerning worship and prayer, does that mean that we and Muslims can actually worship or pray together? Many sincere, loving Christians would reply with an emphatic “No!” One prominent mass-media evangelist was widely quoted as saying that “God does not hear the prayers of Jews” (a remark reportedly amended later). If not Jews, God’s own people, than what about Muslims? Can we meaningfully pray with those whose prayers will not be “heard”? And how do the Muslims feel about our prayers, addressed, as they might feel, to a god falsely trifurcated and attributed with a biological begetting process? With so many possible reservations on both sides, is there any future in attempting shared prayer or worship? I believe that many Christians, and a few Muslims, would answer “Yes!”

If you are one of the yea-sayers, then I refer you to several books by my (and our editor’s) teacher, Kenneth Cragg: *Sandals at the Mosque, The Dome and the Rock*, and *Alive to God*.<sup>4</sup> Especially in the last, Cragg provides an eloquent rationale for shared prayer as well as a wondrous collection of prayer enhancers from a wide-ranging array of sources.

Between syncretism on the left and counter-religion (“commonness in antipathy”) on the right, Cragg proposes “inter-religion” as an expression of our common humanity and our common attitude of servanthood before God.<sup>5</sup> Cragg, with his unique and profound sensitivity to words, is stimulated by the Arabic word *muslim* (“one who submits oneself [to God]”). He notes that beyond the communal sense of Muslim (upper-case M) “is the further and more ultimate sense of the *muslim* [lower-case m], one who is adequately cognizant, in mind, heart, and will, of the Godness of God.”<sup>6</sup> We might also note here that in the Qur’ān Jesus’ disciples are quoted as affirming, “*nahmu...muslimin*” — “we have submitted ourselves [to God].”<sup>7</sup>

## WORSHIP

Worship, of course, is the expression in thought, word, and deed of that adequate cognizance. Certainly we would all wish to be true “*muslims*,” and

<sup>3</sup>There is a good explanation of this in C. E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1961) 7. Ms. Padwick’s masterpiece is an illuminating insight into Muslim spirituality, with materials that could enrich the faith and life of any believer. It could be noted here that pre-Islamic Arabic was very deficient in theological vocabulary, requiring borrowing especially from the Syriac. One must be very sensitive, however, in the matter of religious “sources,” to me an exercise of very dubious value.

<sup>4</sup>A. K. Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque: Christian Presence amid Islam* (New York: Oxford University, 1959); *The Dome and the Rock: Jerusalem Studies in Islam* (London: SPCK, 1964); *Alive to God: Muslim and Christian Prayer* (New York, 1970). In his first great book, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University, 1956) Cragg also addressed this matter. He is a great coiner of phrases; take, e.g., the “compulsion to mutuality” in the chapter on “Mosque and Meeting” (181).

<sup>5</sup>Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*, 68f., 74.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>7</sup>Sūra 3:52; cf. 5:111.

“inter-religion” would suggest that we *muslims* could indeed in appropriate ways, places, and times worship with Muslims.

Just how do we do that? By attending mosque services? We might well be welcome at many mosques, assuming that we took off our footgear and washed ourselves in the proper way. We could invite Muslims to attend our worship services, assuming that they might not be welcome to participate in our “family meal.” We could demonstrate Muslim prayer practices, assuming that this would be done not out of curiosity but with a real desire to understand and even share the experience. These are all things which could be tried, given the opportunity.

In the end, most Christians would probably feel much more comfortable in just starting or continuing to pray *for* Muslims. Some decades ago, on request, I prepared a “Litany [i.e., a responsive prayer] for Muslim Missions.” This was intended as a prayer for Muslims and for the cause of evangelizing Muslims in India. Apparently our editor remembers that, and I must thank him for it. As I look at it today, I marvel at my temerity in letting it be printed.<sup>8</sup> However, today I find myself much more in tune with M. A. C. Warren, who wrote as follows in the general introduction to the “Christian Presence Series,” which he edited:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on [others’] dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.<sup>9</sup>

We can be very forgetful indeed, but we do want to “remember” Muslims!

In my experience, I meet my fellow Christians at the foot of the cross as served, saved sinners. All the human barriers of denomination and theological hangups and liturgical constraints fall away. I look my fellow believers in the face, reach out and embrace them, and say: “My sister! My brother!” and that is enough. My integrity as a follower of Jesus does not, in my opinion, demand the negation of other integrities – unless my god is too small and so not really God at all.<sup>10</sup> For people of other faiths, in this case the Muslims, I have another forum, another *locus*, where I can meet them and “remember” them: in prayer, flat on my face, prostrate before the only One, prostrate on the earth which I believe God created and from which God created me. There, even alone, in spirit I can pray with Muslims, who share that belief, finding the earth as our link to God! This could perhaps be done as follows, mended/amended to serve each one’s needs. The suggestion utilizes the Muslim concepts of declaring one’s intention (*niyyah*) and prostrating one’s body (*sujūd*):

<sup>8</sup>Those who would like a copy may request it of me at: 610 Northwest 73rd St., Seattle, WA 98117-4951.

<sup>9</sup>Included in Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*, 9f.

<sup>10</sup>I know that others claim exclusivity for the truth of their point of view, but they cannot prove that to me any more than I could prove mine to them if I wanted to and tried to.

MY INTENTION (*NĪYYAH*)

Gracious God, I intend to perform an act of worship of You and You alone, with a sense of oneness with others who affirm that You exist, that You have created us, that You alone are worthy of worship and praise and absolute obedience, and that to You will be our returning.

MY PROSTRATION (*SIJDAH/SUJŪD*)

Merciful and compassionate God, I prostrate myself before You.  
You alone are God. You alone are worthy of worship.  
You alone are worthy of adoration and of ultimate praise and obedience.  
You alone do I love with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.  
You have made me of the earth.  
You have filled this earthen vessel with Your love and with Your Spirit.  
You desire that I serve You and please You, and that is my desire too.  
I acknowledge that there are other human beings who also desire to serve  
and to please You and who prostrate themselves before You.  
When we rise from our prostration, we walk on different Ways.  
But, prostrate before You, embracing Your earth, from which You have  
formed both them and me,  
I affirm the humanity we share and the bond of our shared belief that You  
truly exist and should be worshiped with faith and obedience with all that  
we think and say and do.  
Help me to give them the respect that they deserve.  
Help me to love them as You have loved them.  
Help me to serve them as You have served them.  
According to Your good and gracious will, help us to live at peace with one  
another,  
and make us the instruments of Your peace in Your world.  
Help us to share our understanding and experience of You with each other:  
to teach and to learn.  
Gracious LORD, increase my humility!  
Remove from me:  
the desire to dominate others,  
the selfish and proud need to be right and to “prove” that to others,  
the tendency to try to “control” You and put You into my “box.”  
Help me not soon to forget my intention and my awareness of my oneness  
with all those who truly love and serve You.  
To Your great Name, eternal God,  
be all honor and glory in Your world,  
now and forever!  
Amen

The above exercise, flat on one’s face, or even the mere idea of such an exercise, might make one feel very uncomfortable or seem silly or even preposterous. On the

other hand, it might also serve as a guard against pride, prejudice, and religious stereotyping! It should be noted that “inter-religion” does not rule out evangelism for Christians or *da‘wah* (“invitation”) for Muslims. It would seem to require, however, a change in attitude and presuppositions from the norm.

In conclusion, I cannot deny what is in my heart of hearts, though some may find this contradictory. The ardent desire persists that our common meeting-place with Muslims prostrate on the earth as fellow human beings of faith will by God’s gracious action find its ultimate fulfillment in our meeting on our knees at the foot of the cross with all the accumulated misunderstandings removed and as fellow believers in the One who is union beyond unity, the One who in Jesus the Christ invites us into union in love.

OUR COLLECT (*Du‘ā*)

Gracious God, merciful and compassionate, You who encompass the universe but are as close to each of us as our jugular vein, You who created the world and view it and everyone and everything in it with love and compassion, we praise and adore You, and pray that by Your Spirit of Holiness You might enlighten and empower our hearts, that we who believe in You and would obey Your will might truly love one another and reach out to each other with openness and understanding and peace, that thus we might more completely fulfill Your good and gracious purposes for us and Your world. With humility and faith we offer this prayer in Your own most holy and blessed Name. Amen. ☩